CHAPTER 4

FORTIFYING FORTITUDE

For the thoughts of mortal men are fearful, and our counsels uncertain.
—Wisdom 9:14, Douay-Rheims

Psalm 67:36 professes: “God is wonderful in his saints; the God of Israel himself will give power and fortitude to his people.” Therefore, fortitude is a gift of God.
—St. Bonaventure, Collations on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit
IS FORTIFYING FORTITUDE AN EXERCISE IN REDUNDANCY?

The name of the virtue (and gift) of fortitude, derives from the Latin word fortis, "strength." We see this in many familiar English words. A military stronghold is called a fort, and if we want to strengthen something further, perhaps that fort or even our breakfast cereal, well, we'll fortify it with planks and stones, or, in the latter case, with vitamins, in the hope that they will fortify us when we eat them. "Fortifying fortitude" then, means "strengthening strength," but it is clearly not redundant when it comes to the Holy Spirit's gift.

St. Thomas was well aware that some theologians conflated the virtue and the gift, thinking they were but two names for one and the same thing. So, after addressing the virtue of fortitude with remarkable thoroughness in a full twelve articles in the *Summa Theologica*, he addresses in two additional articles the gift of fortitude and just how it differs from and fortifies the virtue. The natural virtue of fortitude is a "firmness of mind" that allows us to do the good and endure what is evil, especially when our actions involve things that are arduous or difficult.

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74 ST, II-II, Q. 123. "Of Fortitude" runs eighteen pages in double-column print in the Dominican Fathers' translation.
75 Ibid., Q. 139, "Of the Gift of Fortitude." (Subsequent citations in this section come from this question's first article.)
Man does possess the capacity to exercise such firmness, both in accomplishing arduous goods and in enduring “grievous evil,” and this is the stuff of the virtue of fortitude.

The gift of fortitude, however, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, allows man not only to struggle to achieve his ends despite difficulties, but actually to achieve his final end. Through virtuous acts of fortitude, perhaps to defend one’s loved ones or country, a person might well be thwarted by death, but through the Holy Spirit’s gift of fortitude, that person can overcome even death and achieve his ultimate end of everlasting life with God in heaven. Further, the gift can infuse within one’s mind “a certain confidence” that will dispel the most powerful fears, as we see in the cases of the holy martyrs, who cherish the gift of fortitude more than even their own bodies.

Our opening quotation makes clear that St. Bonaventure concurs on the special significance of the gift of fortitude over and above the virtue. He starts his lecture on this gift by first describing it “from the perspective of the giver; second from the perspective of the recipient; and finally in terms of the work that comes from it.”76 Then he elaborates, as is characteristic of him, with a wealth of biblical citations and allusions. He expounds on the first point from the perspective of the giver with yet another set of threes: from the perspective of God as Giver, as Redeemer, and as the One who dwells within us.

1. The gift of fortitude is given to us by God, who protects us. Citing Proverbs 18:10, Bonaventure notes: “The name of the Lord is a very strong tower. The just person runs to it and will be exalted.”77 God is the

76 Collations, p. 108.
77 Ibid.
source of strength that he imputes to all things, and this strength is arranged hierarchically, so that God's strength is also passed down to us through the Church He has established.

2. The gift of fortitude is given to us as well “from God who redeems us through the incarnation of the divine Word. Isaiah 12:2–3 states: “The Lord ... is my fortitude and my glory. The Lord has become my salvation. You will draw waters with joy from the fountains of the Savior.” 78 He ends by noting that while Christ became weak for our sake, “the weakness of God is stronger than human beings” (see 1 Cor. 1:25).

3. “The third point is that the influence of fortitude comes from God dwelling within us. Thus, Micah 3:8 states: ‘I am filled with the strength of the Lord, with judgment, and power.’” 79

THE GIFT OF SAMSON’S STRENGTH

The biblical Samson’s strength was clearly a gift from the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as Samson grew, “the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him” (Judges 13:25), and later we are told that before feats of strength in which he conquered thirty and then a thousand men, “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him” (Judges 14:19; 15:14). With a fascinating exegesis of the holy strong man’s story, and how he came to lose the Holy Spirit’s graces, St. Bonaventure proceeds to flesh out this third point about the fortitude that arises from God’s dwelling within us.

78 Ibid., p. 109.
79 Ibid.
To recapitulate the pivotal story in brief: Delilah tries to persuade Samson to reveal the secret of the source of his superhuman strength, which was in his hair that he had never cut. Three times he makes up false stories. He tells her he'll become weak if he is bound with seven cords made of sinews. She has him thus bound when he's asleep and cries out, “The Philistines are upon you, Samson!” He awakens and snaps the cords effortlessly. She asks again, and he clarifies that the cords must be new ones never used before. Again he sleeps, she binds him, calls out, and he breaks free with ease. Delilah is persistent and asks again. Samson tells her the seven locks of his hair must be weaved in a web and pinned to the ground, and again the familiar sequence ensues. Delilah is furious and protests that he does not love her because he has not told her the truth. Exasperated, Samson tells her the true story that his strength lies in his hair. Again he sleeps, his hair is cut, and when he wakes to set himself free, not knowing that his hair has been cut, he finds his strength gone. He is then bound and blinded by the Philistines.

Now here is where Bonaventure's intriguing insights come in. He notes that there are four pleasures of the senses by which the gifts of the Holy Spirit are lost: attention, thought, the inclination of the inner affections, and the rejection of the divine laws. The first binding with cords symbolizes the devil's temptation of Samson through the delights of the senses, courtesy of the beautiful Delilah. The second binding with new cords represents how Samson's thoughts have dwelled on sensual delights rather than resisting temptation. The binding of his hair to the ground shows how, through dwelling on those sensual thoughts, his head has become bound to the earth, his mind firmly focused on earthly things. Finally, he was swayed more by love of the beautiful, but treacherous Delilah than by his love
of the Lord, and Samson revealed the true secret of the gift of his divine strength, thereby rejecting the divine law. The result was, to his surprise, loss of the Holy Spirit’s special gift of his superhuman strength. Notice too there are seven cords to bind him, and indeed, in the words of Scripture, Samson’s strength from the Lord was in “the seven locks of his head” (Judges 16:19, emphasis added), signifying, as Bonaventure notes, “the sevenfold grace of the Holy Spirit.”

Readers of Scripture will likely recall that, while he was bound and blind, Samson’s hair grew back, perhaps as he grew to see again with the eyes of faith and his heart grew strong again in his love of the Lord. When the Philistines gathered to sacrifice to their god Dagon for handing over Samson to them, Samson called on the Lord once again and asked Him to strengthen him one last time. Blessed again with his old strength, he knocked over the house’s pillars, destroying the enemies of God, even though he knew he too would die when the house collapsed. What a fascinating lesson on the gifts of the Holy Spirit in action, especially the gift of fortitude that can lead a strong man even to forfeit his life in the service of God!

THE SACRAMENT OF FORTITUDE

Although none of the seven sacraments is named fortitude, one has a particularly powerful link to the gift of fortitude: Confirmation. St. Thomas wrote that “Confirmation is to Baptism as growth is to birth,” and as we grow bigger, we grow stronger. The Catechism tells us “by the sacrament of Confirmation,

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80 Ibid., p. 111.
81 ST, III, Q. 72, art. 6.
[the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit” (no. 1285). Whereas the sacrament strengthens us in all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it provides us with a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the Faith (no. 1303).

The minister of this sacrament is the bishop, who lays hands on the recipient, anoints him with chrism, and pronounces the words of the rite of Confirmation, invoking the spiritual seal of the Holy Spirit. Why does the bishop administer Confirmation, while priests administer Baptism? “Though he who is baptized is made a member of the Church, nevertheless he is not yet enrolled as a Christian soldier. And therefore he is brought to the bishop, as to the commander of the army.”

Just look at today’s headlines; you cannot ignore the fact that the Church is under attack by a variety of secular forces, and Christians in parts of the world are being attacked, driven from their lands, and even martyred in numbers unseen for hundreds of years. Indeed, we all need to “put on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:11), and “fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim. 6:12) in ways we may not have imagined even a few years ago. Lord, give us the strength of the gift of fortitude!

There is another sacrament that can fortify us too, and we may receive it often. Every time we receive the Eucharist, we receive that kind of fortitude that comes, as St. Bonaventure said, “from God dwelling within us.”

82 Ibid., art. 10.
83 Today (June 20, 2016) I read a headline about a Spanish cardinal threatened with a legal suit for a "hate crime," for proclaiming clear Catholic sexual morality in defense of the traditional family.
ARE YOU CHOOSING WEAKNESS OVER STRENGTH?

Fortitude is the guardian of the virtues, and the gift of fortitude ratchets up the defenses to make them impenetrable when it is deployed. In what ways might we be sabotaging our own defenses?

Aristotle, and St. Thomas following him, spoke of the moral virtues as “golden means,” dispositions to act in just the right manner, situated at just the right distance between the vices of deficiency on one side and the vices of excesses on the other.

Avoiding or moral weakness opposes fortitude as a deficiency, while a foolhardy fearlessness and reckless daring oppose fortitude as vices of excess. There are some souls so overblown with temerity that they distort the strength of fortitude by taking unnecessary risks, “jumping in where angels fear to tread,” and ignoring the wisdom of Sirach (13:2): “Do not lift a weight beyond your strength.” Far more common, though, is that vice of deficiency, the disposition toward timidity and fearfulness that may come to guide our actions (or lack thereof) when situations arise in which we should defend the Faith and stand up and speak out for what we know is right.

Although this is not the place for a detailed examination of what St. Thomas called the “integral parts” of the virtue of fortitude, they bear a brief mention before we zoom in on the gift. In terms of the kinds of positive attitudes and actions that are required for the virtue of fortitude to flourish, we find the virtues of magnanimity, literally “greatness of soul,” that guides our thoughts and actions to great and not petty things, to things that truly matter and are truly honorable, even though they may

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84 Interested readers may note that I have addressed them extensively in chapter 4 of Unearthing Your Ten Talents.
85 From the Latin magnus (great) and anima (soul).
THE SEVEN GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

be difficult to obtain. The magnanimous person seeks lofty goals and is not disturbed if others do not understand or approve, as long as he knows that what he's seeking is morally right and consistent with the Faith.

The other positive virtue aligned with fortitude is that of magnificence, the habitual tendency to try to make or build great things, even if this requires a great outlay of money, for example, in the construction of a church, a school, a hospital, a Catholic radio or TV station or network, or any grand, worthwhile project. Through fortitude we overcome undue fears of threats to our bodies and souls; through magnificence we overcome undue threats to our wallets! Recalling that the gift of fortitude perfects the natural virtue of fortitude, we might ask ourselves if we have given the gift a good base to build upon.

Rather than growing in magnanimity, have we allowed ourselves to become overly influenced by our modern culture and mired in the pusillanimity, "smallness of soul," that focuses too much on the petty things of the world? Or have we overshot the mark, falling prey to the kind of presumption, ambition, or vainglory through which we treat as great not the things of God but our own thoughts, desires, and thirst for fame or power?

Rather than displaying magnificence and contributing generously to the needs of the Church, have we fallen prey to the vice of stinginess or meanness, contributing little to noble projects, while perhaps at the same time, displaying the vice of consumption, or waste, spending money extravagantly on things that don't really matter, just to satisfy our whims or to build our reputations?

Even more central to fortitude than these allied positive virtues that guide us toward the right actions are two virtues that

86 From the Latin magnus (great) and facere (to do or make).
perfect fortitude’s capacity to endure. The first allied virtue is the patience whereby we endure the sufferings produced by others or by events outside our control without giving in to sorrow and defeat and without lashing out inappropriately. The second allied virtue is the perseverance whereby we endure in virtuous thoughts and behaviors even when the going gets tough and stays tough, and when our attempts to achieve virtuous goals are met by obstacles and delays. In the grandest sense, perseverance comes into play as we try to persevere in the practice of our Faith throughout our lifetime, for as St. Matthew tells us, “He who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 24:13). So we might ask ourselves if we have built up or undermined our capacities to endure in fortitude.

Rather than growing in patience in dealing with a difficult situation or a difficult person, have we demonstrated instead impatience by lashing out at the person or perhaps by fleeing the situation, such as refusing to care for a loved one because of his abrasive words or actions toward us? Have we demonstrated resignation by staying the course, but in a spirit of sadness or defeat? Have we overshot the golden mean of patience by an undue subservience, perhaps by actively seeking out and staying in abusive relationships, displaying what is sometimes called “doormat” behavior in modern parlance, allowing ourselves to be stepped on by others without a reasonable word of complaint? Have we displayed what we might call “pseudo-martyrdom” by willfully seeking out such relationships with others that produce obstacles to our own good, and then complaining of the pains we must endure to all who will hear us?

\[\text{Footnote: In St. Thomas’s own words, "Now the principal act of fortitude is to endure." ST, II-II, Q. 123, art. 8.}\]
Clearly there are many questions we might ask ourselves as to how we might undermine the walls to our souls that are guarded by the virtue of fortitude, but what about the gift? Well, the gift builds upon the virtue, so all the same questions are still worth the asking. As for other obstacles contrary to the gift, I direct readers back to St. Bonaventure's analysis of Samson. Samson's strength and courage were unmatched, but when he diverted his attention to worldly pleasures and dwelled on them in thought until they replaced God at the center of his heart, he unwittingly, in a sense, chose to forgo the Holy Spirit's mighty gifts. Of course, even in his life we see the true merciful nature of the Holy Spirit as Love and Gift. For when Samson repented, those "seven locks" began to grow once again and God answered his prayer for new strength.

THE POWER OF PRAYER FOR POWER

The first prayer that comes to my mind when I think of the gift of fortitude is the simple oft-heard "Lord, give me strength!" In fact, there is nothing at all wrong with short, sweet prayers like that to call upon God at times when we face life's difficulties and could use some instantaneous spiritual fortification.

Sts. Thomas and Bonaventure concur that the petition in the Lord's Prayer "Give us this day our daily bread" pertains to the gift of fortitude. Bonaventure explains that this is because bread "strengthens the human heart," echoing Psalm 104:15, and Thomas chimes in that "this gift of fortitude prevents man's heart from fainting through fear of lacking necessities, and makes him trust without wavering that God will provide..." Collations, p. 49.
him with whatever he needs. For this reason the Holy Spirit, the giver of this fortitude, teaches us to pray to God to give us this day our daily bread.”\(^89\) Theologians have long noted deeper meanings involving the bread in this petition, and Thomas explains that it also refers to the sacramental bread that is the Eucharist and to “the Word of God: ‘Not by bread alone doth man live but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God.’”\(^90\) Those words were spoken to Satan by Him who is “the living bread which came down from heaven” (John 6:51). When the devil tries our fortitude, we might both echo Christ’s words and heed His advice with hearty daily servings of the bread of Scripture!

Let’s conclude here with St. Alphonsus Liguori’s petition: “Grant me the spirit of fortitude that I may bear my cross with Thee, and that I may overcome with courage all the obstacles that oppose my salvation.”

**THE BLESSINGS AND GIFTS FORTITUDE FOSTERS**

St. Thomas defends St. Augustine’s precedent in his writings on the Sermon on the Mount in matching the gifts to the Beatitudes in the order in which they are listed in Scripture and finding fitting correspondences between them. Augustine, therefore, matched the fourth beatitude of hungering and thirsting after justice to the fourth gift of fortitude. Thomas acknowledges that while the gift of piety is related to the virtue of justice,

\(^89\) St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Aquinas Catechism*: A Simple Explanation of the Catholic Faith by the Church’s Greatest Theologian (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2000), 137.

\(^90\) Ibid., 141, citing Matt. 4:4.
fortitude is about difficult things, and it is very difficult not only to do virtuous deeds in accord with justice, “but furthermore to do them with an unsatiably desire, which may be signified by hunger and thirst for justice.” (I don’t know about you, but when I read of such an unquenchable desire for justice despite the most enormous of difficulties, my thoughts turn to the gift of fortitude so mightily displayed in the works of St. Teresa of Calcutta.)

As for the fruits that fortitude fosters, St. Thomas suggests patience, which endures evils, and longanimity (perseverance), which holds up over long delays to accomplish worthwhile goods.

THE FORTITUDE OF THE BLESSED MOTHER

What could be more difficult for a loving mother to bear than the torture and execution of her child, and how could she bear this without the Holy Spirit’s gift of fortitude? Fr. Formby recalls the example of Hagar, Abraham’s maid who bore him the child Ishmael. Hagar and Ishmael were sent away, and their water ran out as they wandered in the wilderness. Presuming her son would die, Hagar laid him under a bush and went away about the distance of a bowshot, saying, “Let me not look upon the death of the child” (Gen. 21:16), but God intervened to save them. The Blessed Mother, on the contrary, was blessed with the fortitude to stand close by the Cross and witness with her eyes the suffering and death of her innocent Son because she knew it was His will and God’s plan. Perhaps her example of holy fortitude could help give us the strength to stand by and not flee from the sufferings of our loved ones as they approach the ends of their lives on earth.
THE FORTITUDE OF THE CROSS

Of course, it was the ultimate act of fortitude to experience those physical sufferings that Mary observed, knowing as well that His Mother’s love and fortitude allowed her to be there for Him to the gruesome end of His earthly mission, despite all the sorrow she suffered. The human natural virtue of fortitude, as we have seen, has its limits. Christ prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39), and yet through the Holy Spirit’s gift of unfailing fortitude, Christ drank the suffering of that cup dry, as His Father had willed, so that through His Passion, death, and Resurrection we would have the chance to persevere to the end and share in eternal bliss with the Holy Trinity and to say, like St. Paul, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).
The world’s eyes are focused today on atrocities in Syria. Brutality abounded there nineteen hundred years ago as well, but the land was also blessed with an enduring model of saintliness in the person of Antioch’s second bishop, Ignatius (ca. 35–ca.108), who would become among the Church’s greatest of early martyrs.

During the reign of the powerful and far-reaching Roman emperor Trajan, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch was arrested and sentenced to death for refusing to renounce his faith in Christ. On the long journey to Rome, accompanied by ten fierce “leopards” (Roman soldiers), Ignatius penned seven letters explaining and defending the truths of the Faith—from its universality (with the first use of the term catholic for the Church), to Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, to the Church’s hierarchy and the authority of bishops—and providing one of the most powerful, enduring models of the undefeatable strength of the Holy Spirit’s gift of fortitude.

Ignatius looked his death sentence squarely in the face and did not balk in the slightest, knowing he would be fed to wild animals in Rome. Indeed, he wrote to the Romans that he went willingly, and he dissuaded them from trying to prevent his martyrdom. He wrote them: “Permit me to be food for the beasts; through them I will reach God. I am the wheat of God and I compete through the beasts to be found the pure bread of Christ.”

Indeed, he notes

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that if the animals are too shy to touch him, he will provoke them, their bodies becoming his tomb.

Clearly, St. Ignatius’s remarkable fortitude far exceeded the bounds of natural virtue and bespoke of a mighty stirring of the Holy Spirit. Ignatius was spurred by the spirit of the gift of fortitude to interpret his painful journey and martyrdom as a means to complete union with Christ. Dr. Howell elaborates on the relationship between the Eucharist and martyrdom for St. Ignatius, noting that, in receiving sacramental Communion, a person becomes more a disciple of Christ and grows in desire to be with Christ. Martyrdom provides the means for the union in reality. “The martyr’s heart then finds its fulfillment in full union with Jesus Christ in which he becomes the same reality he receives in the Eucharist and so can be called the bread of God.”

St. Ignatius became the food of lions and the bread of God in the Roman Coliseum, in or shortly after the year 108.

St. Ignatius’s feast day is October 17.

*St. Ignatius of Antioch, pray for us, that embracing the Holy Spirit’s gift of fortitude, and nourished by the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ, we too may persevere in the Faith with hope and with joy, regardless of the persecutions we may be called to endure.*

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92 Ibid., footnote.
Virtue denotes a certain perfection of a power. Now a thing's perfection is considered chiefly in regard to its end. But the end of power is act. Wherefore power is said to be perfect, according as it is determinate to its act.... But the rational powers, which are proper to man, are not determinate to one particular action, but are inclined indifferently to many; and they are determinate to acts by means of habits.... Therefore human virtues are habits.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I-II, Q. 55, art. 1

There's a lot to unwrap in our opening quotation, and that is the end of this chapter, as I'll hope to make clear from its very start! Recall that in the opening quotation of our introduction Thomas mentioned that virtues perfect man according to natural human reason, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit provide even "higher perfections" that come from God and that make our actions amenable to "divine inspiration." And recall that Thomas noted that whereas virtues counter vice and sin, the gifts assist even virtues in making up for any "defects."93

The word virtue derives from the Latin vir, "man," and in Aristotle's Greek, the word arete was used, indicating "excellence." Virtues, then, allow us to become excellent—more fully

93 "The gifts are bestowed to assist the virtues and to remedy certain defects ... so that, seemingly, they accomplish what the virtues cannot." ST, I-II, Q. 68, art. 8.
and perfectly human—by disposing us to perform good acts, to perfect ourselves, and to give the best of ourselves. When we possess the virtues, it becomes easier and more natural and enjoyable for us to do the right things. We're able to maximize our human powers. Virtues make us and our actions good.

Those fundamental human powers include the abilities to desire and to will, to discern what we seek to enjoy or to avoid, and to choose freely whether we will pursue those desires. Since our natures are fallen, our desires by themselves are no sure guide to excellence and happiness. If we are to exercise virtue, our desires and choices must be guided by reason (and for Christians, as we'll see, by our faith as well). This perfection of our thinking, desiring, and choosing is the stuff of the virtues, those peaks of excellence that crown our human natures and point us toward heaven.

THE VIRTUES OF NATURE

Aristotle noted long ago that “goodness has two forms, moral virtue and intellectual excellence, for we praise not only the just but also the intelligent and the wise.” He (and St. Thomas) addressed three so-called intellectual virtues that perfect our human reasoning abilities: science or knowledge (recall that science comes from the Latin scire, “to know”), understanding, and wisdom. In a nutshell, the virtue of science relates to the grasp of cause-and-effect relationships, understanding pertains to the comprehension of fundamental and overarching principles, and wisdom pertains to the highest of intellectual activities, “containing beneath itself understanding and science, by judging both

94 Eudemian Ethics, II, 1, 19.
the conclusions of science and of the principles on which they are based," per St. Thomas. 95

These intellectual virtues help us to attain the truth. They were valued by the writers of the Old Testament, where we see them all together, for example, in Proverbs 24:3-5: "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is mightier than a strong man, and a man of knowledge than he who has strength."

The intellectual virtues perfect the powers of our "speculative intellect" so that we may know what is true, and the moral virtues act to perfect our wills and appetites, or passions, so that we may do what is good. Four of these moral virtues, called the cardinal virtues, from the Latin cardine, "hinge," have long been considered of fundamental importance for all other moral virtues "hinge," or depend, on them.

- Prudence (practical wisdom) harnesses our reason, will, and appetites to employ virtuous means to achieve virtuous goals.
- Fortitude reins in, with reason, our irascible appetite so that we may overcome obstacles to the goods we seek.
- Temperance reins in, with reason, our concupiscible appetite through which we seek out what we see as good.
- Justice reins in, with reason, our will so that we give to each person his rightful due.

St. Thomas tells us, "Human virtues are habits." He used the word habitus, which we translate merely as "habit" at the risk of missing out on the full richness of Thomas's meaning, for the

95 ST, I-II, Q. 57, art. 2.
habits of virtue are far more than reflexive, unthinking ways of acting that we happened to have acquired over time.

Rather, habits that are natural virtues are dispositions or inclinations to seek out the truth and to do the good that we build within ourselves through repeated practice. In essence, good habits are to virtues as bad habits are to vices, vices being tendencies we build within ourselves to follow our passions and whims, even when our reason bids us to hold back. Sins, then, are literally vicious acts (acts of vice), whereas good deeds are virtuous acts (acts in accord with or sprouting forth from virtue).

So then, how might we, by our own efforts, strive to perfect our soul’s powers with virtue, rather than have our soul’s powers perverted by vice? As Aristotle once famously wrote, “We become builders by building and harpists by playing the harp.” So too can we build natural virtues within our souls by simply doing virtuous acts regularly and repeatedly. But you might ask, “How, then, can I do virtuous acts to become virtuous if I am not already virtuous in the first place?” Good question—sort of!

This might seem like a chicken-and-egg situation. In order to perform virtuous actions, wouldn’t we already have to be virtuous? Partially, but not entirely. How does a weightlifter acquire the strength to lift enormous weights? He starts by lifting much lighter weights and then uses progressively heavier weights over time as he grows stronger and stronger. He starts with the muscles that nature provided him; then he perfects them through his habitual actions. Nature has provided us with all the necessary initial dispositions to virtue. As we’ve already seen, we all have appetites, passions, reason, and will. Now,

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96 The latter, alas, seems the goal of so much advertising, popular entertainment, and political propaganda in our day.
what are we going to do with them? To turn these potentialities, these capacities that dispose us toward the good, into full-blown natural virtues, we must perform virtuous acts again and again. As St. Thomas put it, "A disposition becomes a habit, just as a boy becomes a man."^77

Note too, that virtues, when developed, make it easier for us to make the right choices in the future, since such choices have become, well, good habits.

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^77 ST, I-II, Q. 49, art. 2.
### The Virtues of a Supernature

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Ancient pagan philosophers thought that the natural virtues were the be-all and end-all of human perfections. They either lived too far back in time to know or were not aware that one day in Bethlehem, the source and fount of all virtue, indeed,
of all that is, took on human flesh to raise us to heights we had not conceived, from our earthly natures all the way to heaven. God's Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ, came to earth, lived and died for our sins, and with the Father and Holy Spirit has graced us with “super virtues,” so to speak, that exceed our human natures because they are infused in our souls by God Himself when we accept Him. These are called the supernatural, or theological, virtues, and St. Paul enumerated them as faith, hope, and love.

Once these virtues have captured our minds and our hearts, they guide and perfect both the moral and the intellectual virtues and direct all our powers to the things of God. St. Paul writes of these virtues most poignantly in 1 Corinthians 13, where he explains that one of them towers over the other two and will last even in heaven. In heaven we won't need faith in God, because we will see Him and be with Him. Nor will we need hope that we will achieve heaven and that God will supply us with the assistance to get there, because we will already be there.

"Love never ends," though, explains St. Paul, and "the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:8, 13). This love, or charity, will endure eternally as we live and love in the presence of God, the angels, and the Communion of Saints, and it begins here on earth when we accept God and His love in our hearts. St. Paul has told us what this love is like (patient, kind, rejoicing in the right, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping for all things, enduring all things) and what it is not like (jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude, insisting on its own way, irritable, or rejoicing at wrong) (see 1 Cor. 13:4-7).

These supernatural, theological virtues serve to unite us to God, to make us His sons and daughters, and to allow us to share
His love with others. And yet, as awesome and “super” as these supernatural virtues that God infuses into our souls are, He gives us still more with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.
There is absolutely no difficulty in finding saints to illustrate the virtues. After all, any person declared Venerable on the path toward canonization must have displayed the theological and cardinal virtues in his life to a “heroic degree.” I will highlight Aristotle and Cicero for our purposes, though, even though both were pagan philosophers who died before the birth of Christ.

Greatly gifted by God in natural intelligence and possessed by the desire to learn, Aristotle (384–322 BC) exercised the natural intellectual virtues to previously unheard of heights as the Father of Logic, who would be described by the likes of Sts. Albert, Thomas, and Bonaventure as simply “the Philosopher.” He was of particular importance to Christian theologians because of the way his reason led him to the steadfast conclusion that God truly must exist, because of his depth of understanding of human cognition and emotion, and for the way his reason penetrated many truths about the nature of natural virtues, thus paving the way for a deeper Christian understanding of the theological virtues and gifts that would perfect them.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), the great Roman statesman, orator, and philosopher, would also profoundly influence great Catholic thinkers who would go on to explain the gifts. We have addressed St. Jerome’s dream that he was whipped by an angel for following Cicero more closely than he followed Christ. St. Augustine reported that he was drawn to the study of philosophy by Cicero, and Sts. Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas borrowed freely and with full acknowledgment from
the way he described the cardinal virtues and their parts. Cicero displayed the heights of personal fortitude on December 7, 43 BC, when he offered his head to the soldier whom Marc Antony had sent to retrieve it (along with his hands) for daring to think and to write about freedom from tyranny.

May we learn from the examples of Aristotle and Cicero how to make the most of the mental and moral capacities God has given us, and may we keep in mind that as Christians we have greater gifts yet that we may employ in this regard than either of them every fully realized.